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TAGS: [PREL](#) [PGOV](#) [IS](#) [SY](#) [LE](#) [IZ](#) [RS](#)
SUBJECT: RUSSIA KEEPS UP THE PACE IN MIDDLE EAST DIPLOMACY

REF: A. MOSCOW 12035

[1](#)B. CAIRO 6867

Classified By: Ambassador William J. Burns. Reasons: 1.4 (b, d).

[1](#)1. (C) Summary: Following the assassination of Lebanese Minister Gemayel, Russia has become increasingly concerned about political violence in Lebanon, but is unwilling to press Damascus on its role. The MFA preferred to offer legalistic arguments about whether there was compelling proof of Syrian involvement in political violence. Defending Russia's engagement with Syria, MFA Middle East and North Africa Director Vershinin argued that Bashar al-Asad was isolated and faced radical pressures at home which were exacerbated by his international isolation. The MFA welcomed efforts to stimulate more comprehensive talks on Middle East peace, but judged the Arab League's proposal for a conference by year's end as unrealistic. Vershinin argued that the U.S. should take a less rigid view of the three conditions for recognition of a Palestinian unity government. The MFA acknowledged the increased pace of engagement with Gulf states, which was driven by shared energy interests. End Summary.

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MIDDLE EAST VISITORS FLOCKING TO MOSCOW

[1](#)2. (C) In a November 22 meeting, Russian MFA Middle East and North Africa Director Sergey Vershinin reviewed the situation in Lebanon following the assassination of Minister Pierre Gemayel, discussed Syria's role in the region, reviewed prospects for restarting Middle East peace talks, and deplored the ongoing violence in Iraq. He briefly touched on visits by a number of Middle Eastern officials over the past month. (Note: Since Israeli PM Olmert's mid-October visit (ref A), Egyptian President Mubarak has met with President Putin in Moscow (November 1-3) and there have been Moscow visits by Qatari FM Hamad bin Jasim (October 18), UAE Foreign Minister Abdallah bin Zayid (Oct. 30) and Bahraini FM Khalid bin Ahmad al-Khalifa (November 9). End Note).

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LEBANON: (NOT) TAKING IT TO THE STREETS

[1](#)3. (C) Vershinin underlined that Moscow viewed Lebanon as passing through a dangerous and decisive point following the assassination of Minister Gemayel. He reiterated the MFA's statement earlier that day condemning violence in Lebanon and noted that political murders and interconfessional violence were entering an even more deadly phase. Taking a backhanded swipe at the Cedar Revolution, Vershinin stressed that Russia had always supported a national political dialogue that followed regular legal norms and that did not depend on street action, no matter who was calling for change. He claimed that inter-Lebanese dialogue had been making progress on contentious issues such as demilitarization of Hizbollah

and other militias and the status of Shebaa Farms until it was interrupted by Israeli military action this summer.

¶4. (C) Pressed to explain Syria's role in Lebanese politics, Vershinin asserted that Moscow supported the establishment of "fully normal" diplomatic relations between Beirut and Damascus to create a state-to-state relationship. He argued that Lebanese politicians who "recklessly" claimed that Syria was behind the bulk of the violence in Lebanon did not have compelling proof for their accusations and only made relations worse. Arguing that there was no hard evidence of official Syrian involvement in the Gemayel assassination or, for that matter, in many other killings in Lebanon, he argued that political killings must be neutrally investigated and judged by the facts, not emotions.

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SYRIA'S REGIONAL ROLE

¶5. (C) Acknowledging Moscow's good relations with Damascus, Vershinin argued that Russia pursued a step-by-step engagement with Syria in pursuit of shared interests. He welcomed agreement between Syria and Iraq to restore diplomatic relations, arguing that Iraq needed to have good relations with all its neighbors, especially Syria, in order to stem the cross-border flow of militants into Iraq. In his view, President Bashar al-Asad faced a difficult internal situation given pressures for economic reforms. This was coupled with serious problems with many of Syria's neighbors, which only increased Syria's isolation and bolstered radical forces. Israel seemed to be uninterested in pursuing any sort of dialogue with Syria. He acknowledged strong U.S. concerns about Syria's destabilizing role in Lebanon, Iraq and in Gaza and the West Bank, but argued that renewed efforts to engage with Damascus might produce better results.

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MIDDLE EAST PEACE PROCESS

¶6. (C) Vershinin's view was that a general settlement of Middle Eastern disputes was needed rather than piecemeal bilateral settlements, but that current discussions about a Middle East conference needed to be refined. He labeled an Arab League proposal for a conference by year's end as unrealistic -- such an undertaking required a strategic approach and careful preparation and should not be pushed as a tactical ploy. He said that existing conference proposals did not make clear whether the organizers saw a conference as the beginning or the end of the peace process; if it was to be the former, what kind of process would it launch, he asked rhetorically, and how did this fit in with the Quartet's efforts. Participation was crucial as well, he argued, pointing out that the failure to invite Syria or Iran to the July 26 Rome International Conference on Lebanon limited the usefulness of the meeting and should not serve as a model for future regional discussions.

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PALESTINIAN GOVERNMENT AND QUARTET DEMANDS

¶7. (C) Vershinin reiterated Russian support for Abu Mazen's efforts to form a Government of National Unity (GNU). Stating that the situation changed on a daily basis, he said the Palestinians were trying to reach a compromise on ministerial portfolios which would meet Quartet and (by implication) U.S. concerns. Characterizing the U.S. approach to a GNU as "all or nothing," he urged that Washington be more flexible in evaluating whether a new government met the requirements to restore international funding. Acknowledging U.S. warnings about moving the goal posts on recognition, renunciation of violence and acceptance of prior agreements, he stressed that Moscow had followed a different approach to Hamas, which, he emphasized, had been the democratic choice of the Palestinian people. Russia believed the best way to

change Hamas was to engage with it.

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IRAQ/THE GULF STATES

¶9. (C) Vershinin deplored sectarian violence in Iraq and argued that the situation was growing out-of-control with violence now spreading. He reiterated Russia's call for an inclusive national dialogue that produced consensus, pointing out that Moscow had been advocating this position for the past three years. In his view, the death sentence handed down in the Saddam Hussein trial was an internal matter for the Iraqis, but he argued that it was a distraction that had resolved none of the serious problems Iraq faced.

¶10. (C) Acknowledging the steady flow of visitors from the Gulf, Vershinin said that over the last several years Russia had worked hard to build up relations in the region. While political and security issues -- particularly Iraq's future and Iran's emergence -- were a subject of discussion, he stressed that a shared interest in energy matters and investment drove these ties. Vershinin noted that Putin's planned trip to the region (reftel B) had not yet been completely nailed down. (NOTE: An Egyptian Embassy contact confirmed there had been discussions about a Putin trip to Egypt in January, but no date had been set yet.)

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COMMENT

¶11. (C) Russian efforts to remain relevant to Middle East discussions have strengthened over the past several months as Moscow finds positive reinforcement for its role from among its Arab interlocutors. Putin's confidence as a global figure, Russia's continued efforts to portray itself as a great power whose equities need to be taken into account, and Moscow's energy-driven diplomacy intersect in the Middle East in ways that suggest Russian interests will only deepen.
BURNS